

Hungarian Rhapsody

The Hungarian violinist Roby Lakatos comes from an impressive Gypsy violin lineage as **Simon Broughton** discovers



You can tell that Roby Lakatos is a character just by looking at him – the moustache, flamboyant clothes and his playing technique. He's renowned in the classical world, his last recording was his own take on Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*; he's revered among jazz musicians, having played with Stéphane Grappelli and American trumpeter Randy Brecker; and he's famed for his Hungarian Gypsy repertoire, the tradition into which he was born. Over seven generations, Lakatos is a direct descendent of János Bihari (1764-1827), the most celebrated Hungarian Gypsy violinist of his day. Pictures of him show a proud gait, a moustache (not as big as the Lakatos variety), a dark head of hair and strong eyebrows. A strong, romantic figure to be sure, and his name – Bihari – means 'from the county of Bihar,' the area of the Great Plain, famed for its horsemanship and Gypsy culture. With an ensemble including violins, *cimbalom* and bass, Bihari was famous for playing *verbunkos*, a male dance with strongly accented dotted rhythms. The *verbunkos*, starting slow and ending fast, became the signature sound of Hungarian music at the turn of the 19th century.

Last October, Lakatos was a guest at the Amati exhibition in London. It's a violin show for instrument makers, dealers, collectors and musicians. He was performing and promoting his own range of Lakatos Pizzicato violin strings made by Thomastik-Infeld in Vienna. "I make these strings and everybody likes them. They're very powerful and all violinists sound three-times better," he says.

When Lakatos plays he produces fireworks – runs and swoops up the fingerboard, bowing that is too fast to fathom and a *joie de vivre* that makes it look a piece of cake. That's why he's a legend.

Lakatos was born in Budapest in 1965 into one of the most celebrated dynasties in the Gypsy violin tradition. "The Gundel Restaurant was the Lakatos place for years. Already during World War I my great-grandfather was playing there," says Lakatos. From the 19th century, Budapest was famous for its Gypsy music and Gundel, close to the Széchenyi Baths in the City Park, was one of the prime places for the musical and culinary experience. Over the years its guests have included Yasser Arafat and Queen Elizabeth II.

"I started playing when I was three years old, but that was with a toy instrument. It got more serious when I was six years old," Lakatos tells me. "At nine years old I was playing with my father Toni in his band. It was Gypsy music from 7-9pm. But at this time I also wanted to play Brahms, and I went to the Béla Bartók Conservatoire, but I didn't finish."

In 1985, Lakatos got an invite to play in a restaurant in Liège, Belgium. "It was a three-month contract and after that I was planning to go back, but it was a big success, we were playing till 4am in the morning. Now I've been outside for 30 years."

Back in Budapest, Gypsy music was essentially café or restaurant music, adding a distinctive ambience to the evening. In the West, Lakatos realised he had to put this music on stage. This meant he broadened the repertoire to include classical and jazz as well as Gypsy – "all styles, Manouche, Balkan, Russian, flamenco and absolutely different to what was played at Gundel."

In 1986 a friend opened Les Ateliers de la Grande Ile, a Russian restaurant in Brussels. Lakatos played there for 14 years.

"It had 360 different sorts of vodka and became a celebrated place," he says. "People came for the music. When there was a concert in Bozar [the main concert hall], all the musicians were coming there afterwards. That's how I got to know Yehudi Menuhin when I recorded with Stéphane Grappelli. He said 'Everybody in the musical world knows you, but the public doesn't know you,' and he helped me a lot from this moment."

Lakatos started recording for Deutsche Grammophon (and now Avanti Classic) and hanging out with the violin glitterati. In 2000, he commissioned a violin from Leonidas Rafealian, "the living Stradivari in Cremona." But he has also had two Stradivari on loan over the years.

Since the fall of communism in Hungary, Gypsy music in restaurants has declined. It's expensive to have a four or five-piece band, and there is something kitsch about this repertoire or the way in which it's played. Over the past 20 years there's been more interest in the rural Gypsy music as performed by Kalyi Jag, Parno Graszt and Romengo: voices accompanied by guitars, metal water pots and other household implements rather than virtuoso fiddles and cimbalom. Something closer to real Gypsy music than a 19th-century fantasy.

But in the last few years, there's been a slight revival in the retro tradition, largely thanks to Tcha Limberger who's stripped away a lot of the kitsch. And Lakatos, having not played in Budapest for 18 years, has started doing concerts there again.

And frankly, Lakatos clearly enjoys the kitsch, playing 'Fiddler on the Roof', 'Flight of the Bumblebee', Monti's 'Csárdás' and 'Schindler's Liszt' (pun intended). But from the *Songlines* perspective it's János Bihari and the Gypsy repertoire that's interesting. Bihari became a celebrity

and toured the Habsburg Empire between 1802 and 1824, playing in Austria, Hungary, Transylvania, Bohemia and more. 'His musical cascades fell in rainbow profusion or glided along in a soft murmur,' wrote Liszt in his book on Hungarian Gypsy music. Liszt heard him in 1822 when he was just 11, but the impression seems to have been overwhelming: 'His performances must have distilled into my soul the essence of some generous and exhilarating wine; for when I think of his playing, the emotions I then experienced were like one of those mysterious elixirs concocted in the secret laboratories of those alchemists of the Middle Ages.' Liszt himself went on to compose his *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, largely inspired by Bihari. They were written originally for piano and evoke the decorative violin ornamentation and the rippling sound of the cimbalom in the accompaniment. Brahms too, although he didn't hear Bihari personally, wove his music into his own *Hungarian Dances*.

János Bihari himself couldn't write music, but he could certainly compose. His pieces were written down and have been passed on – especially within the Lakatos family. "My father played all the pieces," Lakatos says. Does he have a favourite? "I love 'Hejre Kati'," he says. "It's very technical, very virtuoso like Sarasate or Paganini and it's become my speciality." ♦

+ DATES Roby Lakatos plays at the Turner Sims in Southampton on June 3 and as part of *Songlines Encounters Festival* at Kings Place on June 4. See p13 and the *Gig Guide* for details